

International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language,  
GlobELT 2016, 14-17 April 2016, Antalya, Turkey

## Revitalizing Language Classes through Humor

Kobra Derakhshan<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Islamic Azad University, at Central Tehran Branch, Iran*

---

### Abstract

Creating a fun loving atmosphere in language classes can make language learning a memorable experience. When most students are either passive, or unresponsive, or there are constraints for applying other techniques, a wide range of humorous activities can be used to help students practice their English in an enjoyable manner. Despite the scarcity of research on the pedagogical efficacy of humour in learning and teaching languages, almost all the available researches in this regard emphasize on humour as an effective tool which can help teachers to engage learners more actively in the classroom. However, one question still remains unanswered in the available research, and that is whether it is possible to train teachers to use humour. The present paper was an attempt to answer that question and to investigate possibilities of training teachers to use humour in their classes. In this small scale study, a qualitative approach was employed to collect data through training teachers to use humour, and two interviews before and after the training course. The justification for using qualitative approach was to collect richer data and to obtain a deeper insight about the possibilities of training teachers on how to use humour. Two focus groups of seven university instructors participated in the study. All the participants attended a ten-day intersession training course, on how to use humour in their classes. Each participant was individually interviewed twice; once before attending the training course, and one more time after they had applied what they were taught during the course. They were instructed to apply what they had learned in only two of their classes. The participants were then asked to write a report 2 months after they applied humour in their classes, and provide feedback of their observations of any positive changes in their work as well as their students' overall performance. The findings revealed that it is indeed possible to train teachers to apply humour effectively in their classes. The findings also justify the inclusion of humour in teacher training courses.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of GlobELT 2016

**Keywords:** Humour; Pedagogical Humour; Direct and Indirect Effects of Humour; Immediacy Behaviours

---

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +98-21-883-70650; fax: +98-21-883-70651.

E-mail address: [kob.derakhshan@iauctb.ac.ir](mailto:kob.derakhshan@iauctb.ac.ir)

## 1. Introduction

Human beings are fun lovers by nature. We all remember our happy moments in life, almost with impeccable accuracy. If funny things can be remembered so well, why not use humour in our classes for teaching language? Different types of humorous activities can be used for teaching all components of language; from vocabulary to grammar. Nevertheless, one does not have to be a stand-up comedian to be able to apply humour in teaching. There are many ways of exploiting humour to enhance class dynamics, and stimulate learning. By injecting humour and witticisms in a productive way, we can ensure that learners learn the new items on the spot, while laughing together. Sometimes other techniques, methods, or approaches fail, or there are limitations for applying them. One such method which may not be applicable in some contexts is music. Despite its undeniable efficacy as a teaching and learning tool, for a variety of reasons including cultural and religious ones, we may hesitate to use music in our classes. In such contexts humour can be a great substitute. Most eloquent speakers start their speech with a humorous tale, or a joke or an amusing anecdote in order to get everyone's attention and bring the audience together. By doing so, they make the audience focus on the speaker while waiting for the punch line of the joke or the story. In the case of a classroom, humour can nurture a healthy educational environment, break the ice, and fill the gap between the teacher and the learners.

Humour has long been investigated by researchers in the field of psychology and education, and its pedagogical effects have been emphasized by many researchers (Gruner, 1967; Berwalt, 1992). However, it is given scant attention by language teachers and language researchers; even rarely discussed or employed by them. However, with the advent of CLT, Communicative Language Teaching, on the one hand and the globalization and the need to connect to the world on the other, the need for teaching techniques which emphasized on language as a means of communication, techniques which nourished higher levels of information retention gained momentum. Gradually, classical models of teaching were replaced with models which were more humanistic in their approach (Zillman & Bryant, 1983). Along the same line, many researchers and educators have directly or indirectly emphasized on the importance of creating a relaxed atmosphere to enhance learning. Kristmanson (2000) for instance, emphasises that a welcoming learning environment helps learners not to feel threatened or intimidated. Gardner & Lambert (1972) maintain that such negative emotions as boredom, stress, and anxiety usually negatively affect motivation and success in internalizing information. Loomax and Moosavi, (1998) and Provine, (2000) emphasize the positive effects of using humour in classrooms, and believe using humour can improve classroom climate, develop a positive rapport, reduce tension and stress, increase enjoyment, and make learning easy by creating a real life situation in the classroom. Along the same line, Powers (2005) maintains that occasional, appropriate use of humour can increase student attention and maintain focus. . Vizmuller (1980) maintains that one of the prominent features of both language and humour is creativity in communication. Other researchers too, emphasize on the authenticity of teaching materials and techniques, and implicitly pave the way for introducing creativity in the language classroom. This results in giving at least a minimal attention to the possible effects of pedagogical humour on learning and retention of information.

Trachtenberg too, contends that humour is an ideal and unique vehicle for teaching specific linguistic, cultural, as well as discorsal phenomena in the target language (Trachtenberg, 1979). Emphasizing on the positive effects of humour on language teaching and learning, Askildson argues that, "... such TL [Target language] humour ... is rather... an entirely authentic medium for the presentation of the language, and one which the learners may put to real communicative use in a variety of language contexts" (Askildson, 2005). Based on the findings of these studies, two major types of effects can be considered for humour; *direct effects* and *indirect effects*.

### 1.1. Direct and Indirect Effects

Askildson (2005) discusses two perspectives regarding the effects of humour. The first one is the *direct* effect of humour, which may improve both information gain and retention; and the other is the possible indirect effects of humour "on the general classroom environment". Most of the humour researchers seem to favour this second view, i.e., the *indirect* effects of humour on the general improvement of class atmosphere.

### 1.2. Immediacy Behaviours

One area in which the positive effects of humour on learning have been investigated is in the studies related to immediacy behaviours. Researchers in psychology and education consider humour as a componential element of *immediacy behaviours*; a set of affective behaviours that have an impact on learning. In 1969, Mehrabian developed and introduced the notion of immediacy construct that described communication behaviours, including humour, which help improve “the physical or psychological closeness and interaction of two or more individuals”. Beck, 1967; Beck & Lambert, 1977; Christensen, 1960; Coats & Smidchens, 1966; and Cogan, 1963; all cited in Anderson (1979) report their findings of the positive effects that immediacy behaviours have on classroom atmosphere. Also, Gorham & Christophel (1990) found that immediacy behaviours which involve the use of verbal humour decrease the psychological distance between teachers and their students, create a favourable image of the teacher, and promote learning. Gorham (1988) also reports the findings of his study of other immediacy behaviour items, including both verbal items, and non-verbal items which were further classified into immediate, i.e. filling the teacher-learner gap, or non-immediate, i.e. broadening this gap. The results of his study indicate a considerably positive relationship between immediacy and learning. Based on his findings, he emphasizes on the importance of humour.

### 1.3. No Humour

There have always been contradictory attitudes towards humor, and its pedagogical values. In many countries, education is a serious matter. In Iran for instance, when learners leave a class and say, “... We had fun today!”, they do not necessarily mean that they have also learned anything. This also applies to many other educational settings in other countries which are highly influenced by a Confucian picture of a teacher as a controller, rather than a facilitator (Brandl, 2008); one who is considered “the fount of knowledge” (Holiday, 1994) and the figure of power to be respected and obeyed. In such a setting, using humor in the classroom equals a total loss of control and poor classroom management. Therefore, it may be rather difficult to replace the old, praised view of an ideal-serious teacher, who is the symbol of knowledge and wisdom, with this new ideal-funny picture of a teacher, who does not match their definition of the authority in the classroom. It may also be difficult to make learners realize that this is perhaps a better/easier way to learn. In such an environment, the duty of the teacher will be double-fold. This is enough for those who favour and prefer a serious classroom to a fun-based one - in which learning is the product of the teacher-learner and learner-learner collaboration and cooperation - to argue against the pedagogical values of humor. They argue that it is not worth the risk and the trouble. These contradictory attitudes towards humor consequently lead to reluctance to use humor. Some reasons for this reluctance include:

- Thinking that without an inborn sense of humor, it is impossible to use it in class;
- Fearing they might appear inadequate, silly, or unprofessional;
- Fearing losing control of the class and the task at hand.

Such teachers and educators may prefer not to go after putting novel ideas into practice; because they feel more at ease to continue doing more or less what they used to do, and are familiar with. Another reason why some teachers may feel reluctant to use humor in their classes is that they believe learning through amusement is a contradiction in words. Many learners also still have the same opinion about learning and teaching. Perhaps a stronger body of research is required to assure such teachers and learners that humor can really be an amazing tool for teaching. The limited amount of research on the application of humor in teaching reveals the fact that we have a long way to go before it is accepted as a precious tool for teaching. Laughter is an amazing tool which is appreciated by all age groups, and in all languages and cultures. It is a global aspect of human nature (Kruger, 1996). All we need to do is to make the most of it.

A transient review of the available research on the pedagogical values of humor, suggests that no research is carried out on the possibility of training teachers to apply humor in their classes; whether it is practical, possible, and/or plausible at all to teach teachers how to use humor while teaching, regardless of the fact that they may not have a sense of humor; or this is not a teachable trait. Likewise, is it possible to make them realize how much humor is not

too much humor? Where are the boundaries? Where is the limit? Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the possibilities of training language teachers to use humor in their classes.

## 2. Method

The present paper is the result of a small scale, pilot study performed in order to investigate the possibility of training teachers to use humour in their classes. For this purpose, two focus groups of seven university instructors participated in the study. The participants, both male and female, were full-time university instructors teaching undergraduate male and female students studying either English Literature or Translation at the universities in Tehran, capital city of Iran. The age of the participants ranged somewhere between 28 to 45, and their teaching experiences at university ranged from 3 to 18 years. For the sake of anonymity, the institutions where the participants teach will not be mentioned.

A qualitative approach was employed to collect data through two interview sessions. The justification for using qualitative approach was to collect richer data and to obtain a deeper insight about the possibilities of training teachers on how to use humour. The study is exploratory in nature. The participants were instructed to apply what they had learned, in only two of their classes. They were then asked to write a report 2 months after they applied humour in their classes, and to provide feedback of their observations of any positive changes in their work as well as their students' overall performance, also to report any differences they noticed between their humour-based classes and non-humour classes.

Each participant was interviewed individually prior to the course. All the interviews were conducted by the researcher herself, and the interviewees were allowed to answer the interview questions in the language of their preference; in the case of this study, either Persian or English, to allow them to express their ideas fluently and fully. All interviews were audio-taped and the Persian parts were translated into English by the researcher for the sake of linguistic homogeneity. Data collection was based on a pre-training and a post-training interview. The rationale for the interview questions was to gather information relating to the following areas:

- The instructors understanding of the applicability and importance of humour;
- Their perception of humour as a teaching tool;
- The impact of humour on their overall classroom atmosphere (post-training interview).

Almost all the participants declared that they had rarely used humour in their classes; at least not consciously, or at a noticeable degree. A few of the participants mentioned that they had thought about the fact that humour could possibly help them to get closer to their learners and improve the dynamics of their classes and might have, at times, even dispersedly or intuitively used it; but it had not been in a well-formed or regular basis. Therefore, this pilot study aimed to answer three major questions:

- Is humour teachable?
- If so, how should it be taught?
- Can it be explicitly and systematically taught?

### 2.1. Summary of the Training course

The focus of the training course was on how to incorporate various types of humor into lectures and other presentations, noting that the link between humor and the topic of discussion was the key. The course introduced:

- Planned VS spontaneous humor;
- Unintentional/circumstantial humor;
- Techniques and devices for applying humor such as: jokes, and funny stories, grammatical errors, humorous comments, acronyms and abbreviations, literal/idiomatic translations, proverbs and/or riddles, pronunciation games, funny sounds, gestures, change of voice, exaggerated facial expressions, combining L1 and L2 vocabulary and structure.

Each of the above was first introduced, examples of each one were presented, and then the participants were asked to have presentations for their peers.

### 3. Results

The present paper aimed at investigating the possibility of training teachers and instructors to apply humour in their classrooms. Although the study was performed in a small scale, and was preliminary in nature, the results obtained from the analysis of the collected data indicated the feasibility of training teachers how to use pedagogical humour in the language classrooms. The results also showed the positive outcomes of the training course on the overall improvement of the classroom atmosphere. Almost all the participants in the study confirmed that the training course had been beneficial, and helped them in creating a favourable learning context in their classrooms.

Here are some of the positive comments which were extracted from the reports written by the participants:

- Using humour increased student participation and performance;
- It improved understanding of materials;
- It improved retention and absorption of information;
- It increased students' motivation to communicate in the target language;
- It increased tolerance of ambiguities;
- It lessened the psychological distance between teachers and students;
- It encouraged involvement and creativity;
- It humanized the learning/teaching atmosphere;
- It increased attention span;
- It reduced anxiety in both learners (they feel relaxed and learn while enjoying the lesson), and teachers (they do not constantly fear being judged/evaluated by students).

### 4. Implications and suggestions

It is not plausible to expect every teacher to leverage humour in the classroom, but a good start can be to exploit what has already been applied and has proved to be effective. Humour is a great way of pulling students into class activities and getting them to interact without feeling inadequate. A lot of teachers may worry that being funny or strange will mean they lose their authority; however, one can always keep a balance between the two. By making deliberate mistakes for instance, you show your students that it is OK to make mistakes sometimes; that it is a human quality to make mistakes. Humour connects every single individual in the classroom, including the teacher. Incorporating a little humour into the classroom is a win-win situation. Humour can help students to like their teachers, and once they connect with their teacher, they will never misbehave in a class whose teacher they like. They behave well, not out of fear, but out of respect. If a teacher does not have a sense of humour, there are always lots of examples of humour that can be adapted to the various age groups they teach. When you say something and the students laugh, it means they are listening; benefit from this and teach them new things. The findings of the present research provide a ground for convincing the authorities to include humour in teacher training syllabi. Also, further research is needed to explore the possibility of training teachers to use humour, and to find better ways of incorporating humour in the classrooms. Teachers' use of humour can be more effective if they are trained how to use humour without losing control. The rest lies upon educational authorities to find ways of including humour in the syllabi.

### References

- Anderson, J. F. (1979). Teacher immediacy as a predictor of teacher effectiveness. In D. Nimmo (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook*, 3, 543-559. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books
- Askildson, L. (2005). Effects of humour in the language classroom: humour as a Pedagogical tool in theory and practice. *Arizona Working Papers in SLAT*, 12, 45-61.
- Berwald, J. (1992). Teaching French language and culture by means of humour. *The French Review*, 66, 189-200.
- Brandl, K. (2008). *Communicative language teaching in action: Putting principles to work*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall
- Gardner, R., and Lambert, W. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Gorham, J. (1988). The relationship between verbal teacher immediacy behaviours and student learning. *Communication Education*, 37, 40-53.
- Gorham, J., & Christophel, D. M. (1990). The relationship of teachers' use of humour in the classroom to immediacy and student learning. *Communication Education*, 39, 46-62

- Gruner, C. R. (1967). Effects of humour on speaker ethos and audience information gain. *Journal of Communication*, 17, 228-233.
- Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate methodology and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kristmanson, P. (2000). Affect in the second language classroom: How to create an emotional climate. *Reflexions*, 19 (2), 1-5.
- Kruger, A. (1996). The nature of humour in human nature: Cross-cultural commonalities. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 9, 235-241.
- Loomax, R. G., Moosavi, S. A. (1998). Using humour to teach statistics; must they be Orthogonal? Paper presented at *The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, San Diego.
- Mehrabian, A. (1969). Some referents and measures of nonverbal behaviour. *Behavioural Research Methods and Instrumentation*, 1, 213-217
- Powers, T.(2005, December). Engaging students with humour. *The Observer*, 18(12). Retrieved from <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2005/december-05/engaging-students-with-humor.html>
- Provine, R. (2002). The science of laughter. *Psychology Today*, 33 (6), 58-62.
- Trachtenberg, S. (1979). Joke-telling as a tool in ESL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 13(1), 89-98.
- Viztmuller, J. (1980). Psychological reasons for using humour in a pedagogical setting. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 36, 266-271.
- Zillman, D., & Bryant, J. (1983). Uses and effects of humour in educational ventures. In P. E. McGhee & J. H. Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Humour Research, Volume 2 : Applied Studies*, 173-194. New York: Springer-Verlag.